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ABSTRACT

Fairy tales dramatize a widely held presumption that children are at high risk of abuse in stepfamilies. The idea seems almost accepted as fact, yet it has never been adequately tested. This paper provides detailed information about life in blended and stepfamilies. Sections focus on (1) stepmothers; (2) children's views of their stepmothers; (3) stepfathers and children's attitudes toward them; (4) deficit expectations of researchers regarding stepfamilies; (5) the atypicality of the nuclear family; (6) stepchildren's need to belong; (7) stepchildren's divided loyalties; and (8) sexuality in stepfamilies. Also considered is stepchildren's sense of loss regarding their (1) future, (2) development, (3) parent and grandparents, (4) sense of control, (5) school, and (6) friends. Concluding remarks emphasize that children whose parents have separated, divorced, or remarried still love and miss the noncustodial parent unless he or she has lost all standing as a parent because of prolonged absence or extreme insensitivity to or neglect or abuse of the child. (RH)

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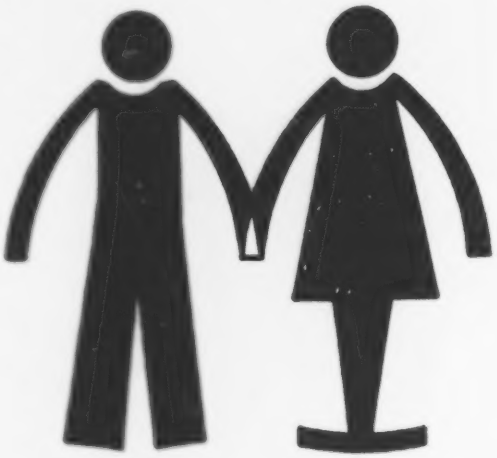

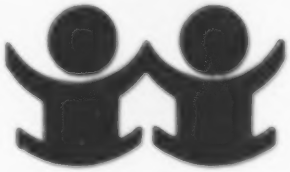

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CHILDREN IN BLENDED AND STEP FAMILIES
by Dr Shelley Phillips

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CHILDREN IN BLENDED AND STEP FAMILIES

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INTRODUCTION

Professionals and researchers often prefer to use the term step rather than blended when describing remarried families, because 'blend' is a bland word and children are individuals who do not blend like colours.

Once one uses the term 'step', one conjures up memories of fairy tales such as Cinderella and Hanzel and Gretel, which have dramatised a widely held presumption that children are at high risk of abuse in step families. The idea seems almost accepted as fact, yet it has never been adequately tested. Some studies suggest that children are more at risk from the biological father and mother than they are from step fathers. Certainly incest taboos do not control step families, but step fathers rate higher only marginally on sexual abuse. Step mothers are least likely to be abusers (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984).

STEP PARENTS

Step Mothers

One of the most insidious myths in western culture is that of the step mother. For example step mothers in fairy tales are often wicked or evil. As a consequence, real life step mothers often try excessively to be a living example that the wicked step mother myth is untrue. The demanding task of nurturing the children of the new spouse, also means that they tend to suffer a lot of anxiety about being good mothers. The coercions of these intermeshed sets of attitudes frequently result in unrealistic self expectations : I'll be the best partner and straighten out your children'. To add to the problem, such unrealistic expectations are often reinforced by their partners and relatives.

To varying degrees these women may expect themselves to:
1. make up to the children for the upset caused by the divorce or death in the original family.
2. create a close-knit happy family in an attempt to return to square one, the nuclear family.
3. keep all members of the family happy and contented.
4. love their step children instantly and equally to their natural children, and receive love from their step-children instantly (Visher & Visher, 1979, p.50).

A stepmother, who has no children of her own, tends to have a

more difficult time in remarried families. She may have no experience to aid her in the task of parenting, and also has to deal with the negative step mother myth, with no positive experience of herself as a mother. While her husband has contact with his ex-spouse in relation to the children, she has no contact with an ex spouse; this difference may lead to jealousies (Visher & Visher, 1979).

Remarried mothers with no step children have fewer conflicts than other women in step families (Visher & Visher, 1979). It is the remarried mother who also becomes a stepmother, who enters a very complex family in which competing groups may develop.

Children's Views of their Stepmothers

Children's views of stepmothers are not only influenced by the state and closeness of their relationship with their biological mother, but also their stage of cognitive and emotional development. For example it is not until late primary school or the early years of secondary school that children begin to understand the diversity in personality and the variation of interpersonal traits. Even then their views are likely to be concrete and simplistic, and it is not until late adolescence that there is a reasonable grasp of the complexity of themselves and others (Phillips. 1982). It is also not until this later stage that adolescents are able to recognise the individuality of their mothers. For younger children, mothers are extensions of themselves to varying degrees. Very young children, for example, in describing themselves, include the things their mothers do for them and accord them no separate individuality: 'My mother looks after me. My mother gets my breakfast.'

By the time they are moved into a step family, most children have become used to a biological mother with a particular personality style and ways of relating to and disciplining them. For emotional, cognitive and physical reasons a long and relaxed period of adjustment is necessary before the child fully adapts to another who assumes the role of mother. The pre and primary school child finds it particularly hard to accept and tolerate the negative aspects of their stepmothers, as can be seen in some of the views of stepmothers given in a study conducted in Victoria, Australia, in late 1982 and 1983 (Ochiltree & Amato,1985). On the whole however this study suggests that children's expectations and experiences of stepmothers are largely positive, and there is little evidence to support the 'wicked stepmother' label. Very few were as negative about their stepmothers as the following:

Boy aged 9: Well, she looks after us alright, but I don't know anything else about her. Sometimes alright, sometimes bad. She tells us off for running in the house (Ochiltree & Amato, 1985).

Whereas most children and adolescents were largely favourably disposed to their stepmothers, primary school children were more likely to describe bad points as well:

Girl aged 8: A nice person. When she gets mean, she's mean. But when she's not in a grumpy mood she's really nice.

Boy aged 9: Light hair and curls in the back, blue eyes and goes to a lot of parties. She yells at us when we are naughty sometimes, otherwise she's really good.

Boy aged 15: Just like Dad, she's not very hard on us. She and Dad hardly ever argue. We get along pretty well and she looks after my sister.

Boy aged 15: She's nice - easy to get along with. I don't argue much with her (Ochiltree & Amato, 1985).

Step-Fathers and Children's Attitudes Toward Them

Whereas step mothers are largely engaged in domestic detail, clothing, pocket money, and feeding, step fathers seem to have an easier time of it, and indulge in more leisure activities with their children. They often plead they are doing a 'man's' job at work and opt out of the necessary child care routines (Burgoyne, 1983).

Many men with children, entering a second marriage, may cling to the stereotype that women are 'natural nurturers', and may pass the nurturing of their children over to the 'new' mother. Children may feel abandoned and unloved as a result, and it seems best on the whole that the natural parent should remain the primary care-giver.

One boy of 15, in the Melbourne Families' Institute study on Australian children and their families (Edgar, 1985), described his step-father as 'basically a male chauvinist. Every time my step mother (the one he's married to now, not the first one) asks him to do something around the house he says, 'I'm not genetically coded that way.'

Children of divorced parents are more likely to live with step fathers than with step mothers. Although step fathers do not have the same negative image as step mothers in fairy stories, they appear not to have an advantage, perhaps because they do not try as hard as stepmothers. In the Melbourne Families' Institute study, some children did not like their step-fathers, but equally there were children who liked them a lot.

Boy aged 9: He's a pretty mean man. Can't think of anything else.

Boy aged 9: He's O.K. sometimes, but sometimes he isn't very good. He doesn't help enough. He just sits there and does nothing.

Boy aged 9: He acts better than my ex father - he's more intelligent and he doesn't call people names (Ochiltree & Amato, 1985).

Girl aged 16: Easy going really nice. Will listen to things.

Sort of the opposite of my father. Listens before he makes his viewpoint. Doesn't fly off the handle easily. Really caring.

Girl aged 8: He's got curly hair and he's English and he doesn't shave very often. He smokes and drinks alcohol- a lot of it. He's not very polite. He swears a lot, just about every sentence has a rude word in it.

Girl aged 9: Strong, he's cuddly and he's cute. He's got big side burns and he's got black hair. He's got tattoos all over his arms.

Girl aged 10: A good person. He always stays home. He sleeps when he comes home from work. Sometimes he makes things like hamburgers. (Edgar, 1985).

Ochiltree and Amato (1985) found fewer positive and more negative feelings expressed by adolescents toward step-fathers, than toward biological fathers. Temper and intolerance were mentioned frequently in stepfathers as follows:

Boy aged 15: He's a bit hard to get on with. He tends to take work out on Mum and I suppose he's all right. He's pretty stubborn and tends to get really sarcastic.

Boy aged 16: Not a very listening person. Ask him a question and he interprets it wrongly. Tells you what he wants to tell you, not what you want to know. Pretty hard to get along with ... builds up tension and then lets it out all in one go. He drinks a lot and everything seems to revolve around that.

DEFICIT EXPECTATIONS OF STEP FAMILIES

Most of the research on step children has been based on the assumption that they will be deficient in comparison with children within nuclear families. This is known as the deficit comparison model (Ganong & Coleman, 1984). There has been a failure to account for the complexity of step families; small or non random samples have been used, and there has been far too much weight given to clinical reports of data gathered from one family member.

Much of the recent interest in step children and step parents, and consequently much of the professional literature, has been initiated by therapists and counsellors. This clinical literature has been informative, but case study research and clinical impressions of step families, who are encountering problems, present a skewed perspective. (Ganong & Coleman, 1984). Step families should be studied in their own right and not as inferior family forms.

Ganong and Coleman (1984) looked at 38 empirical studies and found that the remarriage of parents did not appear to relate to problem behaviour or negative attitudes toward self and others in stepchildren. In general, there was little evidence that children in step families differ from children in other family

structures on such variables as school grades, academic achievement, independence, I.Q., psychomatic symptoms, personality characteristics or social behaviour. Most children liked their step parents and got along well with them. Step children viewed divorce more positively than children in single parent and nuclear families.

Some studies have found that step fathers can compensate for losses experienced by boys who are separated from the biological father, and that they had a positive effect on their cognitive development. They suggest that this is not always the case for girls. Girls also display less warmth than boys toward their step-fathers, and are more anxious in step families than nuclear families (Clingempeel, Brand & Ievoli, 1984).

This may have something to do with the fact that some researchers have found, despite many difficulties, a closer bond between mothers and daughters after divorce than between mothers and sons (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978). This closeness may be threatening to stepfathers, and the daughter may fear the loss of closeness with the mother.

However, despite the more positive response of boys to the step family, they are significantly more likely than girls to wish they lived with the other biological parent. Thus girls may tend to attempt to work at a difficult situation, rather than glossing it over.

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IS NOT THE NORM

Edgar (1985), reporting on the Institute of Family Studies research on Australian families and their children, indicates that one cannot assume that the nuclear family is the norm for most children. There are also divorced families, separated families, homosexual families, lesbian families and step-parent families of many varieties. The following is an example of a non nuclear family, to which society gives little or no recognition:

Steve, aged 16 has a divorced mother who for the past three years has been living in a lesbian relationship. The mother is now studying at university while her lover comes from a working class background so there is some tension over time and attention. The parents had tried communal living but Steve's father (a surgeon) didn't like sharing his wife so the marriage ended and he is now remarried. Steve says he 'knew it was coming. It wasn't much of a shock as it didn't happen quickly. Sometimes I wish they could get back together again. It's not possible'. Steve visits his Dad and they get on well, though he often 'loses his temper. I love him'. Of his mother, Steve says "She considers herself a feminist. She likes to be friends. I don't think it particularly thrills her to be looking after us. She really likes to yell'. All he will say about her lesbian partner is that his mother has shocked him with 'the odd thing, mainly her relationships.' Steve fights with his sisters, one of whom 'refused to notice' the divorce, the other being 'too young to understand'. He hated shifting house and changing schools,

'though I think I handled most of them pretty well'. He belongs to a karate club and skis, trains a lot to keep fit, and 'might do something with computers'. His mother feels he is close to her, intelligent but worries about his social ability. 'As a lesbian I wonder if its because of me he won't bring his friends here'. She says, 'I had a big talk to him eighteen months ago. His view was 'Why do I have to be in this sort of family? That is, divorced, lesbian mother, horrible little sister, communal household etc. He spent a few months with his father and came back slightly mellowed and more appreciative of our home' (Edgar. 1985, p 18).

The median age for divorce is now 35.5 for men and 32.8 for women (Edgar, 1985). This means that many divorces involve dependent children. Since 1976, a total of 413,706 Australian children, aged less than 18, were involved in their parent's divorce. In 1982 one out of every three marriages involved one or both partners who had been married before. Over a quarter of all remarriages have children present from previous marriages. In Australia, in 1982, the estimated number of step families was 133,500.

One should not assume that the current trend is abnormal. Marriage has been more popular since World War 11 than previously. In the history of family life a marriage of 30 years is very much the exception. The current Australian length of marriage is similar to that in Stuart England, when 10 years was about the norm (Daw, 1983).

Children in past centuries probably experienced disruption of their parent's marriage more frequently than they do today, through death or desertion. Throughout history, children have had step families, but usually as a result of death without the resulting complexity of access, conflicts and resentment which mark many contemporary step families (Edgar, 1985). Such disturbances, appear to be less for children in one parent families, according to Edgar(1985).

Cultural Lag In Institutions

Despite the contemporary diversity in family composition, social institutions often remain rooted in the concept of the nuclear family as the experience of all children. Notes sent home from schools, parent-teacher associations, graduation ceremonies, greeting cards, and general advice in newspaper columns tend to assume that the child is in a nuclear family. This often creates embarrassment and discomfort for children.

As a result, children from such families often feel on the outer, because the place of their family in society is ill defined. Visher and Visher (1979) argue that step-families are culturally disadvantaged by folklore, and that members of step families have a sense of 'being different,' and feelings of alienation which are both psychologically and socially based.

Many children find themselves in a second family and have to sort out new rules and relationships with step-parents, step

grandparents and uncles and aunts and step sisters and brothers. There are more individuals to fit into the family system. Also for many such children, the question is: Who is my family?. Children may live elsewhere or visit another family. In most cases children hold membership in two households.

What is expected of parents or children in step families is ill-defined, and the problems of the step family are not understood by relatives or friends. People are generally ill prepared for the roles of step father, step mother, step child, step sibling or step grandparents, which may be why the divorce rate is higher with second marriages. The lack of clearly defined roles and boundaries may place stress on family members, and contribute to difficulty in establishing a sense of family identity and a sense of belonging.

The following step family arrangement is an example of ill defined boundaries:

Sarah's two daughters live full time with her and her new husband, John. Her son David visits weekends and Maria, John's daughter, lives alternative weeks with each of her biological parents. In this case the children benefited from the different experiences of the two households, but it is not always the case if children do not feel they have a place in each household.

'In Edgar's study (1985), children in step families tended to report a lesser sense of togetherness and closeness with their families, although the sense of togetherness and closeness is only seen in slightly more than 50% of children from intact families. Step children also exceed others in believing that their parents get on well together, which no doubt reflects the parent's happier state than in the previous marriage.

THE NEED TO BELONG

The need to belong is a major factor to most children in step families. Changes to a new home, sharing rooms with step siblings, more siblings, sharing a parent with his or her new spouse and children, can produce deep feelings of insecurity in children.

'Where will I belong?' is a common question.. This needs to be clarified continually. Children need to know where they fit in, and to be assured that they are wanted. If their need to belong and have a definite place in the household is not recognised and addressed, children often become withdrawn and disruptive.

Step children often feel more discriminated against by step parents than by natural parents, and most often by a step parent of the opposite sex (Bowerman & Irish, 1962). The situation can be improved by planning for special times alone with a child and a remarried parent, retaining some of the privileges and responsibilities a child had previously, or allocating a drawer with a few toys and clothes for each child who does not live with a family most of the time.

Changed Hierarchy

Another factor, that can contribute to insecurity, is that new step families often mean a changed hierarchy for children. An older child may find she has a rival of the same age. An eldest daughter, who acted as the main support person for her single father, may find her old role has been supplanted by the new wife. Youngest children may get more older brothers and sisters to fuss over them or boss them around. The eldest may be displaced by another who is older. Thus each needs to be treated individually and with empathy because, for each child, becoming a member of a step family may be a different experience.

The changed hierarchy can often be one of the major sources of anxiety for children in a step family. It is important to remember, when a new step family is formed, that the child is experiencing shifting boundaries and an altered family system, all of which may overload the child with stress. Usually these organisational changes are accompanied by changes in affectional relationships. For example the remarried parent now spends time with the new partner and his or her children, and the biological children fear they are not wanted unless constantly and demonstrably reassured.

An illustrative case is that of Andrew, Jane and Mary, aged 9, 7 and 5 whose adoring father suddenly left their family. They found sharing him with his new spouse's children of the same ages bewildering and painful when they visited him at weekends. 'Why are those other children doing things with him'?, was a constant question. In the end the experience was so painful that the children refused to visit, stating, 'Those other children are always there'.

Relating To Step Siblings

Sibling rivalry occurs in any kind of family system. Feelings of jealousy toward step siblings are often magnified because of the clear and obvious preference for biological children by parents and grandparents. Children who visit their biological mother or father may be given special attention and treats, not accorded to the step children.

Grandparents may invite the step family for Christmas and give their grandchildren expensive new bikes and their step grandchildren a book each, or take their biological grandchildren to the zoo and leave the step grandchildren behind. Unequal treatment fires feelings of rejection and jealousy which may lead to fights and tantrums. If one set of siblings is getting special treats, equal treats elsewhere, preferably at the same time, need to be arranged for the others.

Step siblings, after some adjustment, may get on well together, but usually retain the closest feelings for biological siblings. Some children may feel guilty because they have greater affection for their biological brothers and sisters than their step siblings. They may feel that they should not feel differently

and, when accidents occur, may need reassurance that they are not bad because they are relieved that it was not their 'real' sister who was run over by a car, for example.

Duberman (1973) suggests that the birth of a baby into the step family may improve the relationship between step siblings, although Visher and Visher (1982) believe that some children may feel a loss of position. Certainly the arrival of the baby changes the family system for there is now a biological family unit within the looser family and someone 'belonging' to everyone has been added. As in all families, how the new arrival and the other children are treated are crucial factors in harmonious relationships. Sometimes in such a situation a previously attentive step parent begins to reject a step child or all the attention is focused on the new baby. Step children often fear that their parent and the step parent will care more for a child that ties the adults together biologically, and need assurance that they are valued and wanted.

SENSE OF LOSS

Children in step families have often lost a future as they'd projected it and this causes distress. In fact, relationships in step families are difficult because a number of people have experienced loss and there may be guilt, anger, fear of failure and unrealistic expectations. Even when the mourning process has been worked through, the individuals, in the step family, are aware of the possibility of loss, and they are wary of new close relationships. The need to deal with losses in a psychologically healthy way is of prime importance for individuals involved in remarried families (Visher & Visher, 1982). Divorce and remarriage of their parents are no longer regarded as causal factors in mental disturbance of children (Phillips, 1982). Nevertheless failure to grieve and come to terms with loss is often found in children with a previous history of disturbed family relationships. These children, who cannot or who are not permitted to grieve, are those most likely to need clinical help. However this paper is not intended to deal with clinical outcomes, but the myriads of ordinary children who increasingly find themselves in step families, and who ultimately cope and the means by which they do so.

At the time of remarriage the parents are in blissful anticipation and often unaware of the losses, questions and doubts of their children. For children, the process of divorce and the transition to remarriage of the parent/s, can be a time of loss and grief. If the remarriage takes place within a short period of time after the divorce, the child may not be over the feelings of grief associated with the loss of the original family. If the remarriage takes place a lengthy period of time after the divorce, a special relationship between parent and child may have developed, and the remarriage represents a further loss.

In both cases, the child is likely to have different feelings from the adult about the remarriage. When a remarriage takes place, children are asked to share a parent with another adult

and perhaps other children as well. Rather than feeling that something new and special has been added to their lives, children may experience further feelings of loss and upset.

The following is a fairly happy case but the tinge of things missed is apparent. A girl, aged 15, is commmenting upon her reconstituted family:

We started going out more when Mum met P. We had more money. Mum was less lonely. It also changed me a lot because before Mum met him she used to come to me with her problems. Its always the same with single parents, they havn't got anyone else to discuss their problems with, so they come to you - it drives you mad. I liked it. I didn't miss having a father, but its much better now having P here (Edgar, 1985).

Developmental Loss

If a marriage occurs while children are in their teens, adolescents may find that they are expected to return to an earlier developmental stage. For example they may not only have been chief confidant, but have looked after many aspects of the household and had many responsibilities. Said one 18 year old: 'When my mother remarried I couldn't do at 16 what I'd already done at 12'. (Visher & Visher, 1982). The sense of loss is often compounded because children and adolescents, who are thrust into step families, may not always be treated with the sensitivity and care that they have been taught to accord others, as in the following case:

Rebecca has stopped hating her father and his new wife; they also have a new baby. She even got over the hurt that no one told her the baby was coming. No one bothered. But she is considerate and loyal. When she has a good time at Dad's house she does not tell her mother because she would cause undue pain. Mum often makes remarks about Dad not being there to help her and I always see how tired she is. She has to work and never takes a day off, even if she's sick'. If Rebecca could have a wish it would be that her stepmother and the baby were not there. She likes them but Dad's wife doesn't work and her mother has to. (Case reported in the London Times, April, 1983).

Loss of a Parent

To most children the loss of the daily presence of one biological parent, to whom they are used, is most distressing and when access is difficult or nil the distress is most often exacerbated further. On the whole it is better for children's feelings of security and self esteem if they can maintain access to both biological parent's (Phillips, 1982 & 2nd edition, 1985). However they may feel obliged to hide their grief, thus increasing their suffering. Further the common but unrealistic belief by many parents in step families that step children and step parents should and will care for and love one another immediately creates much anxiety. Step children are expected to become the mirror image of the romantic love of the parents. Yet the normal expectation in any other situation is that making

friends is a long process.

Some remarried parents insist that a child call a step parent 'mother' or 'father' before a relationship has developed. Children frequently feel uncomfortable with the name, or that they are being asked to betray their other parent. Children may feel guilty that they do not love their step parent, or they may feel pressured and angry. If step parents allow themselves to be available, but do not push, very often caring relationships will slowly develop.

Knowing future step children well before marriage has been recommended as being helpful to remarried family adjustment (Duberman, 1973; Maddox, 1975; Mayleas, 1977; Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977; Knaub & Hanna, 1984.)

There are also issues in step families which are not formalised by legal marriage. Children may learn to trust and care for mother/father's temporary partner, as indeed the latter may do for them, only to feel betrayed when the relationship with the mother/ father ends. They may inadvertently get a picture of adult relationships as unstable, inconsistent and vulnerable. Some have happier endings as in the following case:

Astrid, 12, has a round face and round eyes that retain smudgy traces of mascara. She was a baby at the first separation and rather enjoyed the ensuing years of instability and her mother's many men friends. It was like a long party. Then her mother remarried and things became more stable. Her life with her two 'real' sisters, step brother and step sister and the new baby brother is fine. She visits her father every week. He lives in a flat by himself and she feels sorry for him because he appears to be so lonely. ' I feel obliged to be nice to him. I like Dad but the only memories I have of him are sort of as a friend'. (Case reported in the London Times, April, 1983).

Loss of Control

Children in primary school are often angry and guilty about a parent's separation and remarriage. They feel helpless in the face of their lack of control over their lives in such a situation, and may become depressed and anxious. Attempts to break up a new marriage, acting out behaviour of many kinds and school failure, are common manifestations of their inner turmoil, and attempts to control their lives. They need to be given some sense of control appropriate to their age, such as choosing clothes, hairstyles and cuts, choice of friends, what to eat for breakfast and which chores will be theirs. This helps with feelings of mastery. One needs also to watch the excessively good child. They may idealise the past and feel that their behaviour caused the divorce, and that they can achieve a return to the past by excessive goodness. This is an unrealistic attempt at mastery over a hopeless situation which can lead to depression.

Grandparents

Step children can lose or gain grandparents. For example, an angry custodial parent may prevent visits by the parents of the departed spouse. In Wisconsin a recently revised divorce statute provided grandparents with the right to petition the court for visiting privileges (Ahrons & Bowman, in press).

School and Friends

There may be geographical changes so that children lose old playmates and need to make new friends and find their way around a new school and a new neighbourhood. Said one nervous little boy of 8: 'We hate going to different schools, because when you get there you feel scared (Edgar, 1985).

DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Unfortunately the loyalty conflicts of children are often exacerbated by the failure of the biological parents to achieve psychological separation from each other. The parents may be consumed with anger and bitterness and use their children as pawns and messengers.

Young people perceive the worst kind of stress, as being subject to one biological parent talking negatively about the other biological parent (Visher & Visher, 1982). Children are genetically and psychologically part of both their parents, and consequently criticism and anger directed at a parent is a hurt to the child also. It is painful to have negative comments made about a parent who is loved by the child.

There are pulls in many directions for children of divorce and remarriage. Children may attempt to retain the loyalty of the departed natural parent, who has left home, by trying to drive out the step parent. The child's divided loyalties may take open expression. For example, Don, aged 16 years, refused to go to his speech night, unless his mother and father attended and his new step father did not attend. Erika telephoned that she was not coming to spend the weekend with her step father and mother because her father had invited her to go ski-ing.

Interpersonal bonds and extended family relationships which predate the remarried couple's relationship are brought to the step family. For example previous parent- child relationships mean that the two adults in the step family do not start in the same place in the relationship with the child.

Children in step families are often asked by parents to accept a step parent and move away from a biological parent. Research is needed in this area, but clinical data suggests that children will be more accepting of their step parent, if they do not have to give up one parent to gain a new parental figure. It is best when the adults involved are able to give children permission to enjoy both of their newly constituted families and both parents.

Adolescents

One thing that can make step parents feel insecure is that, during adolescence, offspring sometimes wish to know more about the estranged or non-custodial parent, as part of their curiosity about their own identity. They may seek a change in living arrangements. The diversity of more than one household can contribute to growth and development, but changes should be discussed carefully. Although manipulating changes in response to anger is not productive, step parents need to adjust to and accept divided loyalties, which may result in the adolescent's wish for flexible and free access to both biological parents. Patience about such matters can be difficult, as adolescents tend to be wary of step parents, and are more likely to test the limits of discipline (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977).

Grandparents

It should also be noted that many grandparents find it difficult to accept the changes involved in remarriage, and may attempt to influence their grandchildren to take one side or another.

Return From The Other Household

Another sensitive area is the period of strain when children return from their other household. Parents are often hurt when, on such occasions, children may be moody, or shut themselves in their room. It is often difficult for parents to realise that children, because of divided loyalties, need some time to shift comfortably from one relationship, involving mother and step father, to another involving father and step mother. Even in the best of relationships, children may need time alone so that they can make the physical and psychological transition.

Enforcing Differing Rules

Parents often feel threatened by the child's comments about differing rules in their other household. 'We dont have to go to bed so early when we are with Mum,' or ' Dad lets us choose what to eat,' or to the stepmother: 'My mother doesn't make me vacuum my bedroom'. In these situation it is best to acknowledge that different people have different rules, but in 'this household these are the rules'. If children have participated in the rule making they are often more reasonable.

Knaub and Hanna (1984) found that children felt that step parents should proceed carefully in respect of rules and discipline. Some described their step parents as behaving in an undesirable and dogmatic manner, such as: 'The worst thing about my step family is that my step father thinks he's always right and we're always wrong - what he says goes.' Such children suggested, as a desired change, that the step parent listen and show a willingness to compromise.

Sexuality

Sexuality may be problematic with step children in step families. Because adolescents are attempting to cope with their own sexuality, they may have difficulty dealing with the sexualised atmosphere of the step family, particularly in the honeymoon stages. Passionate embraces are probably best left to the bedroom. Even so the sexuality of the parents cannot be ignored, especially as in the biological family children tended to think of their parents as non sexual beings.

Another problem is that step parents may find themselves experiencing feelings of attraction to a step child, who is a younger edition of their mate, especially if they are experiencing difficulty in their relationship with the new spouse (Visher & Vischer, 1982). The absence of incest taboos in step families can lead to highly disturbed acting out by adolescent step children. Adolescents sometimes engage in sexually seductive behaviour, with the goal of bringing about a separation between adults, or because they are competing with a parent or a step parent. The difference between feelings and behaviour should be made very clear, and dress codes and room arrangement need to be paid attention.

CONCLUSION

For children, separation and remarriage involves a series of changes in their lives which may cause emotional stress. Unfortunately parents are undergoing their own stresses, and guilt, and are not always able to support their children adequately in this period. The parent who no longer lives with the children, who is typically the father, may not only experience a sense of loss, but experience many practical difficulties in keeping in touch with his children. On access days he may not know what kind of food to give the children, how to cook, and have no experience of looking after his children domestically. He may have difficulty with discipline and organisation, and feel jealous, inadequate or fear rejection. Such difficulties may drive some fathers to limit their time with their children, thus increasing their childre's feeling of rejection.

Above all, it is important to remember that for those children whose parents have separated, divorced or remarried, unless the non-custodial parent has lost all standing as a parent through extreme insensitivity to the child, neglect, abuse or prolonged absence, he or she is still loved and missed and is important to the child.

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